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Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region One
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Ref:DV120-01
April 4, 2001

TO: Environmental Quality Council, Capitol Building, Helena, 59620-1704
Dept. of Environmental Quality, Metcalf Bldg., PO Box 200901, Helena, 59620-0901
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Director's Office – Rich Clough; Fisheries Division – Karen Zackheim; Legal Unit
MT Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, 225 North Roberts, Veteran's Memorial Building, Helena, 59620-1201
Montana State Library, 1515 East Sixth Ave., Helena, 59620-1800
Jim Jensen, Montana Environmental Information Center, PO Box 1184, Helena, 59624
George Ochenski, PO Box 689, Helena, 59624
Wayne Hirst, Montana State Parks Foundation, PO Box 728, Libby, 59923
Montana State Parks Association, PO Box 699, Billings, 59103
Joe Gutkoski, President, Montana River Action Network, 304 N 18th Ave., Bozeman, 59715
Rep. Dee Brown, PO Box 444, Hungry Horse, 59919-0444
Sen. Jerry O'Neil, PO Box 2058, Kalispell, 59903-2058
Flathead County Commissioners, 800 S Main, Kalispell, 59901
Flathead County Library, 247 First Avenue E, Kalispell, 59901
Stan Frasier, Montana Wildlife Federation, PO Box 1175, Helena, 59624
Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, PO Box 595, Helena, 59624
Arlene Montgomery, Friends of the Wild Swan, PO Box 5103, Swan Lake, 59911
Warren Illi, Flathead Wildlife, Inc., PO Box 4, Kalispell, 59903
John Winnie, Trout Unlimited, PO Box 638, Kalispell, 59903-0638
Jim Mann, The Daily Inter Lake, PO Box 7610, Kalispell, 59904
Rep. Rob Raney, 212 S. 6th, Livingston, 59047

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region One, has completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Abbott Creek project. The purpose of the project is the installation of a permanent fish passage barrier and removal of hybrid fish to reduce introgression between native westslope cutthroat trout and nonnative rainbow trout in Abbott Creek, a tributary to the Flathead River.

There were no changes to the draft EA; therefore, the draft becomes the final EA. A copy of the Decision Document is enclosed for your information.

Sincerely,

Dan Vincent
Regional Supervisor

DV/nli
Enclosure

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT AND DECISION NOTICE FOR ABBOTT CREEK FISH PASSAGE BARRIER PROJECT

April 4, 2001

Project Proposal and Justification:

Hybridization between native westslope cutthroat trout and nonnative rainbow trout is a leading factor contributing to the decline of genetically pure cutthroat trout populations in the upper Flathead River system. Deleray et al. (1999) reported that hybridization is prevalent in the main stem Flathead River near Columbia Falls and Kalispell. For the Columbia Falls section, 44 percent of the sample consisted of westslope cutthroat trout x rainbow trout (hybrids), and in the Kalispell section, 20 percent of the sample consisted of hybrid trout. Recent genetic surveys revealed that Abbott Creek, a tributary to the Flathead River near Martin City, supports a population of fish consisting of westslope cutthroat trout x rainbow trout hybrids (MFWP, unpublished data, Kalispell). Furthermore, MFWP conducted a radio-telemetry study to determine where and when hybrid fish spawn that were tagged in the main stem Flathead River near Columbia Falls and Kalispell during spring 2000. Results showed that 8 of 9 (88%) hybrid fish tracked during the spawning period migrated to Abbott Creek and spawned in the stream (MFWP, unpublished data, Kalispell). Combined, this information suggests that Abbott Creek is a major source of hybridization in the upper Flathead River system and thus poses a threat to the long-term persistence of migratory cutthroat trout populations in the Flathead system.

We will install a permanent fish passage barrier in Abbott Creek to prevent hybrid adult fish from using the stream as a spawning area. In addition, we will operate a fish trap downstream of the barrier for 6-10 consecutive years to manually remove the hybrid spawners from the population. Removal of rainbow trout and hybrids from the stream will eradicate the existing hybrid population spawning in Abbott Creek and ultimately reduce the threat of hybridization in the Flathead River system. Pending completion of a successful disease screening and authorization from FWP Fish Health Committee, live fish captured in the fish trap will be transported to a nearby close-basin lake for use in FWP's Urban Fishing Program. The overall goal of this project is to reduce the degree of hybridization between native cutthroat trout and nonnative rainbow trout in the upper Flathead River system. Failure to immediately suppress and/or eradicate rainbow and hybrid populations in the Flathead system will likely result in further population declines of cutthroat trout. The proposed action is consistent with the Flathead Lake and River Fisheries Co-management Plan (2001-2010) developed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), with the goal of reducing nonnative fish to favor native fish in the system.

Environmental and Social Impacts of Project:

There will be temporary short-term increases in total suspended solids during the construction phase and shortly following installation. During construction, all reasonably applicable best management practices will be employed to minimize sedimentation to Abbott Creek. There will be minor changes to the fish community in the Flathead River system associated with the action. The spawning population of rainbow trout and hybrids using Abbott Creek will ultimately be eliminated. Consequently, this may reduce the distribution and abundance of nonnative rainbow trout and hybrids inhabiting the Flathead River system. Therefore, the community of fish in the Flathead River will likely shift towards a native species westslope cutthroat trout assemblage. Installation of a fish migration barrier in Abbott Creek will eliminate upstream access by migratory fish species; bull trout and brook trout populations will not be adversely affected. The proposed action may reduce the opportunity to harvest rainbow trout in the Flathead River. Maintenance of current levels of angler use should be possible with the proposed action. We do not anticipate a reduction in the quality and quantity of fishing in the Flathead River because the availability of suitable habitat for cutthroat trout will be increased with a decrease in the abundance of rainbow trout.

Public Involvement:

In compliance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, an environmental assessment was prepared and circulated for public comment from February 7 through March 9, 2001. Notices were advertised in local newspapers, and copies of the EA were made available at local libraries and FWP, Region 1 headquarters in Kalispell. The following comments were received:

- One comment was received in favor of all aspects of the project.

Decision notice:

Based on the comments and urgent need to remove the rainbow trout population from Abbott Creek, I recommend that the proposed project be implemented and continued as needed to reduce or eliminate the potential adverse impacts of rainbow trout and hybrids on native westslope cutthroat trout in the upper Flathead River system.

4/4/01

Dan Vincent, Region One Supervisor — Date
MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks